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ABSTRACT

Ways to further the development of higher education and research as a field of study are addressed, with a focus on the role and importance of various disciplinary perspectives. It is argued that, in simplified terms, the field of higher education and research is dominated by two major traditions: "science studies" and "higher education studies." For both traditions, there are areas of interdisciplinarity: in science studies this core area centers on a theory of science/sociology of knowledge perspective, whereas in higher education studies, this area consists of an organizational perspective. It is suggested that the field of higher education and research will not develop into a full-fledged discipline, although in the United States there are a large number of departments of higher education. Instead, a strategy for the future is recommended: a core of interdisciplinary efforts, surrounded by a periphery of single-discipline contributions. A chief aim of such a strategy would be to integrate the knowledge focus of science studies with the organizational focus of higher education studies. It is proposed that the following disciplines be integrated in the study of higher education and research: sociology, history, and education. This strategy is particularly appropriate for the Swedish setting. (SW)

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ARE SOME DISCIPLINES MORE RELEVANT THAN OTHERS?

By Rune Premfors

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Introduction

My concern in this paper is how to best further the development of higher education and research as a field of study. In particular, I will focus on the role and importance of various "disciplinary perspectives".

In simple terms, one may imagine three basic positions or strategies with respect to the role of disciplines:

(a) Disciplines pursue their research in an "isolated" fashion, utilizing higher education and research as one among many imaginable empirical illustrations. Knowledge cumulates as bits and pieces from the efforts of traditional disciplines.

(b) Disciplinary perspectives are integrated in a way which justifies the charachterization of the study of higher education and research as a new discipline. Knowledge cumulates largely through efforts within this new discipline.

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(c) Processes (a) and (b) occur - albeit to a limited extent - simultaneously. A "core" of integrated and interdisciplinary efforts is surrounded by a larger "periphery" of single-discipline contributions. Knowledge grows through both types of process - but also through the interaction between "core" and "periphery". In particular we would expect traffic from the latter into the former.

Below I will discuss these three "basic positions" in both a descriptive and a normative or strategic perspective. I will argue that position (c) is both a reasonably good characterization of current trends and a defensible strategic position for the future.

A descriptive perspective: Two major traditions

Again in simplified terms, it could be argued that the field of higher education and research is dominated by two major traditions. I will label them "science studies" and "higher education studies" respectively. To be sure, borders are fuzzy and there is much, and probably increasing, overlap.

Science studies (science of science, research on research) is the oldest and most encompassing tradition. I will not try to trace its roots and development; others have already done it better than I could (cf e.g. Bärmark, ed., 1984). Its focus is scientific processes and the scientists - in whatever institutional setting they appear. Initially the field was primarily concerned with philosophical and historical studies, often with a biographical bent. Increasingly, however, the tradition has become dominated by a sociology of knowledge perspective, but with an important input of primarily philosophical and historical perspectives. Efforts have also been made to develop a distinctive

theoretical base (a theory of science; cf Bärmark, ed., 1984, and Aant Elzinga, 1986) as a "core" and with various social science and humanist disciplines as empirically oriented parts of a "periphery". In the Swedish context, the "history of ideas and science" is partcularly important (cf Sven-Eric Liedman, 1986) among bordering disciplines.

Higher education studies represent a more recent and less encompassing tradition. Its focus is on the social institution of higher education (including its research activities) and its societal role. It largely grew out of "the 1960s" i.e. in particular the outbursts of student unrest and the growth of mass higher education institutions. Increasingly the "core" of the tradition is made up of studies of higher education - systems and, in particular, institutions - as an organizational phenomenon. But important research is also concerned with "input" and "output" aspects of higher education, such as social recruitment patterns and the role of higher education in elite formation and in the labor market generally. In terms of disciplines, the sociology of organizations - or, better perhaps, organization studies in general - dominate the "core", assisted by political science, management studies and pedagogy/education. But other subdisciplines of sociology - social stratification, sociology of knowledge etc - history (including, again, in Sweden the "history of ideas and science") and economics are also involved.

One may dispute details in this thumbnail sketch of the two major traditions, but I am confident that a study of their relevant "invisible colleges" would confirm the general argument: in view of the affinity of the research foci of the two traditions, there has been remarkably little interaction among them.

More important in the context of this paper, however, is that both traditions may largely be characterized in terms of position (c) above. Most contributions may be classified as single-discipline efforts; if this was all there was, we would in descriptive terms be in position (a), and very far from prosition (b). However, this single-discipline dominance (in quantitative terms) is in both traditions complemented by a "core" of efforts which contain significant elements of interdisciplinarity. In science studies this "core" centers on a theory of science/sociology of knowledge perspective; in higher education studies it consists rather of an organizational perspective.

A strategic perspective

To me position (c) as outlined above not only represents a reasonably good description of the current trends within higher education and research (as a field of study); its blend of a few interdisciplinary and many single-discipline efforts also represents the best strategy for the future. The challenge may be said to consist in identifying the nature of these trends and in formulating measures to strengthen them. In support of this normative stance I will first argue against position (b) - which entailed efforts to create a new "discipline" - as well as position (a) - which implied single-discipline perspectives only, before I elaborate my vision of the future in terms of position (c).

What are the chief arguments against turning the study of higher education and research into a new, integrated discipline? I think such a strategy is both unrealistic (in most national contexts) and generally undesirable. Only in the United States does there seem to be sufficient "social demand" and resources for a signi-

ficant number of specialized educational and research units in the field of higher education and research. Most of these are either departments of higher education, chiefly oriented toward the professional training of administrators, or research institutes leading a rather uncertain life in a long-term perspective. It may be too rash a judgment, but many would argue that the best research in the field of higher education and research in the U.S. is <u>not</u> performed within such permanent or semi-permanent settings. Instead it emanates from researchers or research groups linked with research environments of a broader kind - traditional departments or institutes encompassing more than the study of higher education and research. Specialized departments of education do not seem to be able to attract the best talent among those who pursue research in the field (there are of course many individual exceptions). Relatively few social scientists and humanists seem to be willing to view the field as a life-long commitment, at least in the sense of giving up their career within the broader framework of one of the traditional disciplines; they obviously want to be historians, sociologists, political scientists etc first, and only then students of higher education and research.

Whether this is due to the lack of a sufficient number of career opportunities in the latter field or to a conviction that the traditional disciplines are "more important" in the context of "scientific advancement" is of course impossible to say. Which set of motives dominate is of importance from a strategic perspective: in the former case we have to do with a "vicious circle" which may be broken - a sufficient number of career opportunities would attract sufficient talent; in the latter case we have to do with a more rigid "structural" feature - higher

education and research as a field of study seems largely bound to be considered inferior to the established disciplines.

In the Swedish context, efforts to "discipline" higher education and research as a separate field of study seem even more unrealistic and undesirable. Largely this is simply due to the much smaller size of the existing research community and - with realistic assumptions - the possible "higher education and research community". Today a very small number of researchers are wholly oriented toward the field; even fewer intend to stay there so long as to consider it a life-time career.

In sum, then, the field of higher education and research will not realistically develop into a full-fledged discipline. With sufficient resources poured into the field it may take on a number of superficial features of one - such as in the United States where a large number of departments of higher education exist - but this would not imply the creation of a vivid field of research full of exceptional talent.

Do we, then, have to accept strategy (a) - knowledge growth through bits and pieces produced within the context of the traditional disciplines - as the only realistic strategy? It would be unfortunate. None of the traditional disciplines could persuasively argue (despite sometimes heroic efforts; cf Lennart Svensson's /1986/ claims on behalf of education) that they cover most of higher education and research as a societal institution. Thus different disciplinary perspectives are needed in order to provide a broad "coverage". But as with other major social institutions, the traditional disciplines leave us with blanks and an all too limited understanding of significant relationships. Multidisciplinarity is not enough; interdisciplinary efforts are

needed. It may be argued that this "integrating" effort should be the responsibility of policy-makers and other stakeholders as consumers of research knowledge. To an important extent I consider this a valid point, but far from entirely. It would be entirely valid if the blanks and the missing relationships were only relevant to higher education and research as a field of practice. However, I am prepared to argue that they are equally problematic for the field as an area of "basic research".

Finally, I will try to elaborate position (c) as a strategy for the future. In the Introduction it was outlined as a position /strategy where there was a "core" of interdisciplinary efforts, surrounded by a "periphery" (perhaps quantitatively dominating) of single-discipline contributions. My attempt at a descriptive account of the current situation within the field of study argued that its two major traditions could in fact each be described in such terms. In sketching a strategy adhering to position (c) below I will, first, argue that a chief aim of such a strategy should be to integrate the "cores" of the two traditions - to try to marry the knowledge focus of science studies with the organizational focus of higher education studies. Second, and in a separate, concluding section of the paper, I will spell out which disciplines are in my view more relevant than others.

To characterize the "core" of science studies as knowledge-focused and that of higher education studies as organization-focused is of course a very crude statement. Many a research in the former tradition has centered on organizational variables, including those present in higher education settings (for an excellent illustration, see Bulmer 1984). And within the tradition of higher education studies an important trend during the

last years has been the increasing attention paid to the research function of institutions (cf e.g. Wittrock & Elzinga, eds, 1985); also several important contributions have within the context of an organizational perspective emphasized the implications of the "knowledge-intensive" character of higher education.

A prominent example in the latter vein is Burton Clark's The Higher Education System (1983). Clark shows convincingly how fundamental features of higher education organizations - from basic units to national systems - are determined by the logic of their basic task structure. These organizations are unique in many respects and differ significantly from "industrial organizations, governmental bureaus, and the many agencies that dot the nonprofit sector". At the same time, however - and this, one may add, is a good supplementary reason for studying them in depth - "other milieus are becoming similar to higher education as they base themselves on knowledge, science, and profession" (p. 11).

It is of course no coincidence, then, that the first chapter of Clark's magnum opus is entitled "Knowledge". It is also not surprising, considering the admirable scope of the book that there is little room for specifics and nuances with respect to various types and forms of knowledge in higher education, and the detailed organizational implications of such variations. The book is rich enough, but it may have profited further by drawing on important current work in this area (e.g. that of Richard Whitley; cf Whitley 1984 and earlier works; also Becher & Kogan 1980). As it now stands, Clark's analysis largely rests upon a rather simplified notion of traditional disciplines and university departments.

On the whole, however, The Higher Education System represents an important effort to integrate knowledge and organization perspectives in the study of higher education and research. An important further example of such efforts is a project which has recently been completed by a group of researchers ("FORSTYR-gruppen") at the School of Business Studies in Copenhagen. A wealth of insights is contained in three books by the group members (Agersnap et al, 1983; Fivelsdal, ed., 1985; and Foss Hansen 1985). In this context, two features of the project should be noted. First, a conceptual framework is developed dealing with basic "forms of coordination" ("styrformer"). In contrast with most earlier similar attempts in the field of higher education and research (including Clark's and my own; cf Premfors 1986) it specifically includes "knowledge" (also termed "dialogue") as a specific and in the context highly relevant form of coordination (the concept is partly inspired by Habermas; cf Beck Jørgensen & Larsen in Agersnap et al, 1985; also Foss Hansen 1985).

Equally important, however, the research did not stop at innovative conceptualization. The analytic framework was applied, modified and tested in a number of careful case studies (four university departments and a sectorial research institute). The empirical analysis strongly supports earlier observations concerning higher education organizations as extremely complex, "loosely-coupled" systems. But even more significantly, it illustrates the great variety among such organizations and provides a wealth of ideas with respect to the basis of such variation. Just to mention one such basis: the interrelationship between the teaching function and the research function of a department. A department may well, for example, conduct highly specialized, "internally determined" research, and at the same time engage in teaching

activities which are quite elementary and wholly determined by "external forces" (a modern language department is a case in point).

Here I have not done justice to either of these two impressive research efforts. My purpose has rather been to suggest briefly - by citing the best examples I know - the direction in which I think the "core" of higher education and research studies should travel in the future: toward a synthesis of the knowledge-focused perspectives of science studies and the organization-oriented approaches of higher education studies.

Conclusions

My preference, then, is for strategy (c) as outlined in the Introduction above. The study of higher education and research should not strive for the status of a new discipline, nor should it proceed by the "equal misery"-principle, spreading available funds to all social science and humanist disciplines. There has developed a "core" of integrated and interdisciplinary efforts surrounded by a "periphery" of single-discipline contributions, and this set of current trends should be consciously strenthened.

The "core" of the field (at its present stage of development) should primarily consist of efforts which seek to integrate the perspectives and results of the science studies and the higher education studies traditions respectively. To accomplish this requires a determined interdisciplinary effort. In terms of specific disciplines and their subspecialties such an effort should at least include sociology (both the sociology of knowledge and that of organizations), history (in particular the history of

ideas and science) and education. In Sweden, the theory of science evidently also belongs to the set of key contributors within the "core" of the field.

In conclusion, then, some disciplines are in my view more relevant than others in furthering basic knowledge of higher education and research. Three important qualifiers should, however, be added. First, to some significant extent the "core" lives off the "periphery"; both are important although the "core" has been singled out for preferential treatment. And, equally important, the presence/absence of competent or even excellent researchers is a self-evident constraint, as in all efforts to further basic knowledge. In such contexts, no research may even be preferable to bad research. To put it differently: if high-quality research cannot be promoted within the favoured disciplines, then strategy (a) is preferable. Finally, the strategy advocated here is heavily context-bound; I consider it the most useful one for the near future and, particularly, in the Swedish setting. Again, in other and different contexts, strategy (a) - relying chiefly on the internal dynamics of the entire set of social science and humanistic disciplines - may be preferable.

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